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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the academic success of 30 low-income African-American high school students. The 20 females and 10 males were participants in the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program, a high school program that places previously low-achieving, low-income, and minority students in a special class that offers them academic and social support. Using qualitative data, the study shows that, while most of these students went on to college, the strategies they used and the attitudes they developed towards going to college differed across gender. This research exposes the importance of looking at the construction of academic success as a product of the intersection of race, class, and gender. The social relationships in the homes and communities of these young people transmit a specific set of messages that are unique to their gender and are in response to the anticipated roles they will face in the African-American home. (Contains 23 references.) (Author/SLD)

Running Head: Gendered Af-American Achievement Strategies

# A Gendered Look at the Academic Achievement of Low Income African-American High School Students: Strategies of Success



by

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the academic success of 30 low income African-American high school students. Using qualitative data, this study shows that while most of the students went to college, the strategies employed and the attitudes developed toward going to college differed across gender. This research exposes the importance of looking at the construction of academic success as a product of an intersection between race, class, and gender.

INTRODUCTION

Considerable concern has been raised over the poor academic record of African-American students. For example, Ogbu (1991) has pointed out that in contrast to successful voluntary minorities such as Asians, "involuntary" minorities such as African-Americans avoid adopting serious academic attitudes and behaviors because they "interpret the school rules and standard practices as an imposition of the dominant group members' cultural frame of reference..." To adopt these practices would create the impression among their peers that they are no longer part of the same cultural group. As a consequence African-American males and females are said to resist education and actually buy out of the process.

The success of the African-American students in this study challenge these conclusions. They did not adopt an ideology of resistance as suggested by Ogbu but instead they bought into an academic culture. The African-American students in this study are considered academically successful because the majority of them went to college.

Inspite of this general level of success, a closer look within this population of African-American students reveals some interesting differences along gender lines. Students' decisions about where to attend college and the strategies they employed to get there differed for men and women. These differences are significant because they suggest that African-American men may be

at greater risk for future educational and occupational success.

This paper shows that if we are to understand the academic achievement of high school African-American students we must understand the role of gender in shaping students' beliefs, convictions and actions toward education and their future occupations. Social scientists have correctly acknowledged the role that culture plays in constructing academic achievement but have generally ignored the impact of gender as an important cultural factor. They privilege instead, ethnicity or class membership. In order to conceptualize the social formation of educational outcomes in a more comprehensive way, it is necessary to discern the ways in which gender interacts with race and class to affect educational attainment.

Furthermore, it is important to go beyond a conception of gender as a biological trait acquired at birth. Gender must be understood as a process which is constructed in interaction between students' cultural background, the institutional mechanisms or culture of the school and the social and economic structural constraints of society. Gender, as a socially constructed identity, acts in a reflexive way to inform our beliefs and attitudes regarding education. In turn, these beliefs construct the actions or strategies we adopt to influence our academic achievement.

Almquist (1989), Dill (1983), Joseph and Lewis (1981), Higginbotham (1981) and others have discussed the importance of exposing lived experiences across gender, within the African-

American community. They have been helpful in pointing out the necessity of searching for patterns in the ways in which women and men of color describe themselves and their relationship to society. In doing so, we can gain important insights into the differences and similarities across groups and presumably within them. In other words, we can identify both the structures which shape these men and womens' lives, the ways in which they talk about how these structures affect them, and how the two interact to determine the actions they take in the classroom (Dill, 1983:138).

METHODS

The analysis and conclusions presented in this paper are based on ethnographic research which I conducted as part of a larger project on a high school untracking program called AVID (See Mehan et al. 1996 for complete details.) AVID is an acronym for Advancement Via Individual Determination. It is a high school program that places previously low achieving, low income and minority students in a special class that offers them academic and social support. Students in this program stay in school and go to college in record numbers.

In this paper I focus on twenty African-American females from low socio-economic backgrounds who were in the program. I examine how their everyday lives, affected by the imperatives of society and the school untracking program in which they participated, constructed the actions and strategies these

students developed to achieve academic success. Observations and interviews were conducted over the course of three years beginning in 1991.

While the focus of this study is on AVID Black females, it is instructive to compare their experiences with what I have learned from AVID Black males about their educational experiences and family background. Thus, whenever possible I attempt to draw comparisons from a group of approximately ten African-American male AVID students who I interviewed quite routinely over the same time period. These students were all from the same high school.

I cannot guarantee that the sample of twenty African-American females and the sample of ten African-American males are representative of the African-American community in general, nor is it my intention to generalize in this way. I make no claims that their perceptions are shared by other African-American high school students. This research does, however, provide a framework by which to look at the ways in which the gender, class and ethnicity of African-American students can intersect with a specific set of institutional practices within a school, respond to the imperatives of our economic structure and construct academic success.

## THE INFLUENCE OF STUDENTS' BACKGROUND ON THE ACADEMIC LIFE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AND FEMALES

### Living in a Low Income Black Community

As I attempted to understand the educational success of the Black women and men in AVID, it became apparent that their gendered position within a Black family and a Black community constructed a specific set of convictions and beliefs regarding education and their future economic opportunities. Faced with the reality of their life experiences and the perceptions of blocked opportunities and constraints within the economic structure, these young African-American men and women developed gender specific strategies to achieve educational and occupational success. By looking at how attitudes and practices are constituted differentially for African-American men and women, we can understand in a more comprehensive manner how academic careers are affected by gender.

First, it is instructive to look at student beliefs and convictions about the relationship between education and their future careers. While both the African-American women and men wanted to go to college they held different reasons for attending college. The African-American females who participated in AVID were all very career oriented. They saw college as a way to better their future lives. One of the girls spoke of it in very practical terms. She said, "I'm going to college. I want to be there. It's the only way to get a job" (Teesha). Unlike the African-American boys in the same AVID class who typically

expressed motivation for going to college in order to play sports, the girls typically chose to attend college because there was a specific career they wished to pursue.

Also, unlike their male peers the girls spoke of job aspirations in more specific terms. For example one student wanted to go into computer science and another wanted to be a psychologist. Another female senior told me she wanted to be a teacher and yet another said she wanted to be a lawyer.

The Black males in the study were far less specific about their future occupational goals. One boy said he would probably go into business of some kind but he was not sure. Another male said he wanted to take art but he wasn't sure what he would do with it. Karl planned to "cool out for a year" and then maybe go to a college back east where he could play ball. One thing he was certain about was that he "would definitely play sports, basketball. I plan on going pro" (Karl, April, 1992).

Sports seemed to be the guiding impetus for Black males with academic aspirations. Future career goals, unless they related to sports, took a secondary position. Their pre-disposition toward athletics is not surprising given it is one of the remaining and viable avenues for legitimate adult success among Black males. Furthermore, the media continues to portray successful Black males as either athletes or entertainers, a representation that is historically rooted in the history of U.S. Black-White race relations.

Although most Black males in AVID held onto the dream that

they would someday play professional sports, they also realized it was probably not likely to happen. In fact many of these young men received this kind of forthright advice from a volunteer counselor who occasionally visited the school. As a black male who once wanted to play sports, he told these boys how he had the same dream but got injured during a college basketball game his very first season and was never able to make it to the pros. It seems that they heard the words but they didn't hear the message. Efforts to get these boys to deal with the reality of opportunity were insufficient to change their aspirations to play sports. Perhaps the messages from the media and elsewhere are so persuasive, the young men are able to justify holding onto their dreams.

Second, the convictions and goals of the AVID African-American men and women were shaped by their family. The women received academic encouragement from their parents that was strong and deliberate. The parents of these women profoundly influenced their daughter's attitudes toward education.

The African-American women in AVID all expressed comments that reflected a real "push by their parents to do well academically." The women received academic encouragement from their parents that was strong and deliberate. Latisha a sophomore stated it this way: "My parents tell my sisters and I all the time that we HAVE to go to college . They want us to be better off than they are." Latisha has two sisters in college, one is at Yale.

While some research suggests that girls are successful because they are encouraged by their mothers (Joseph, 1984), sentiments were decidedly mixed within this group as to which parent "pushed" academic pursuits most. One student commented that "dad really pushes me more than my mom. If things are too hard my mom says its okay. My dad is afraid I'll give up" (Teesha). Another woman assigns responsibility for her success to her mom. She said "My mom always tells me if I don't go to college I won't achieve success" (Savanah). All the women said they received a lot of "push" to go to college from either one or both parents.

While many of the AVID African-American women felt their parents wanted them to go to college, some of the women mentioned that they felt "daughters are pushed more than sons [to go to college]." This is consistent with the findings of Hare (1979) who found that Black parents encouraged the achievement of their daughters while their sons were allowed to get away with more in the home. Hare argues that Black males developed lower self-esteem than the Black females. This may affect the decisions of Black males not to further their education.

Where these students were encouraged to go to college also varied along gender lines. The AVID African-American women in this study said that they had parents who directed them to attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities. One student commented, "My mom only had 1 year of college. She wants me to go to college. She wants me to go out of state to experience

being away from home." Savanah's mother spent the previous summer before graduation taking her daughter back east to investigate Hampton, Spellman and other Black colleges. This is also a practice that some AVID coordinators undertake in order to acquaint their Black students with Historically Black colleges. The benefit of this orientation is that it ended up pushing African-American women toward four year colleges.

Many of the females chose Historically Black colleges because they said they wanted an opportunity to be the "majority" for a change. They wanted to compete in classrooms without whites and their mothers supported their decisions. Kaylee's mother had gone to an all Black college when she was young and the daughter told me she wanted to have the same experience as her mother.

Most of the AVID African-American males also received parental support for college but several of the male students said their parents would have been just as satisfied if their sons went into the military. In several instances their fathers pushed them to make this career choice, since they had been in the military themselves or they were currently in the military. The push for the military was even more profound if finances were a severe problem for the family.

The African-American males in this study did not anticipate attending Historically Black Colleges in large measure because they did not think those colleges would offer them the athletic scholarships they were looking for. These students expected to

go out of state only if they received a sports scholarship. As a consequence, when they did not qualify for athletic scholarships, they typically went to nearby two year colleges. While this accomplishment is important, it is necessary to revisit some earlier research which has pointed out that many community college students tend to "cool out" (Clark, 1960) and may ultimately drop out. The choice to attend community college may be placing this group of African-American males at greater risk of not graduating from college than their female peers.

Third, in addition to the gender specific encouragement from their parents to attend college, the African-American females and men who participated in AVID held strong convictions about going to college because of their gender identity in a Black lower socio-economic community. Their attitudes stemmed from recognition of the economic constraints in which they lived and the constraints they would undoubtedly face in the future as adults.

It is instructive to look at the influence of class along with ethnicity and gender if we are to gain an understanding of how attitudes and behaviors are constructed. Most of the AVID Black men and women were from low income families. Most of the parents had not gone to college. The gender-class position of these students may have affected the messages they received from their parents. Higgenbotham (In Dill, 1983) found that parents of working-class backgrounds tended to stress educational achievement over and above other personal goals. Dill,

commenting on Higgenbotham's analysis notes that "these women never viewed marriage as a means of mobility and focused primarily upon education, postponing interest in, and decisions about, marriage" (Dill, 1983:140).

Dill's own work on Black women who were born at the turn of the century reveals how social conceptions of the Black woman, and women's work in general, limited their educational and employment opportunities drastically. As a consequence, racial discrimination played heavily even into these womens' aspirations. All of them used whatever resources available to do as well as they could do. Societal forces made the women, "clearly aware that being Black, poor, and female placed them at the bottom of the social structure and they [needed to use] the resources at their disposal to make the best of what they recognized as a bad situation" (Dill, 1983:145).

Joseph (1984), Fuller (1983), Ladner (1979) and others have pointed out that young Black women are pressured to work hard in school and be prepared for independence and economic security. The African-American women in AVID indicated that these messages matched onto the attitudes and beliefs they received from their AVID teacher. The African American female students in my study realized that they must make decisions that would enhance their economic opportunities. They articulated a genuine concern over the economic constraints imposed on women in general and African American women in particular.

We know that women, children, and women of color are the

three groups in our population who are the most likely to live a life of poverty. "In 1987 one of every five families with children under eighteen was headed by a woman..." and 50% of all black families are female headed (Rodgers, 1990). This is significant because over 50% of all families who are poor are female-headed households. The "feminization of poverty" is a reality for hundreds of thousands of women, particularly Black women.

Even when these women are able to find jobs, they tend to earn significantly less than male workers. Most wages have not been able to keep up with inflation. In addition to low salaries, Black women are often concentrated in jobs that are traditionally considered "womens' work," like service sector jobs which pay low wages and are vulnerable to job layoffs. Economic conditions, coupled with a high incidence of divorce and separation, along with an increase in out-of-wedlock births have contributed to realities that young African-American women live with and must reconcile.

Given the comments made by the AVID African-American women regarding the push their parents gave them to encourage academic endeavors, it appears as though class background may have informed their actions. Kaylee talked about college and the opportunity it gave her to have a better life than her mother had. She said she saw the problems her mother had faced as a divorced mother of three children. Her mother often told her of the mistakes she made in marrying young, quitting school and not

getting trained to provide for her own economic well being. According to Kaylee, these stories made a significant impact on her decision to attend the University of Southern California.

Some of the AVID parents reaffirmed how their own financial problems had inspired their daughters to take different paths than they had taken. Mrs. Grant explained that she is divorced and has had to raise two daughters by herself. She feels that her daughters are successful because "they are not afraid to work. They have seen me work hard and they have seen the value in school. They understand about sacrifice. Savanah has learned to persevere and to make the right choices."

Kaylee's mother told me that her divorce was hard on her daughter because she had to face the fact that her father didn't work at anything. She has also had to face the mistakes that she [her mother] has made like "misusing credit and falling into ruts".

Even as the parents often presented examples of lives that the girls refused to follow, concomitantly many of the girls indicated that their parents provided strong role models for them. Many of them told me how their parents went back to school and how proud they were of them. When I interviewed some of the parents, they confirmed the influence they had on their children's educational motivation. Amanda's father went back to college because he "wanted to show his children that if he could do it they could as well." He wrote a poem for his daughter's graduation Baccalaureate ceremony where he expounded on the

virtue's of getting an education and that "excuses" were not allowed for failure. He commented that he and his wife take every opportunity to point out to their children the successful people in their community. He describes these people as the ones who have gotten an education and bettered themselves. This family like the many others I spoke with provide clear, unambiguous messages to their daughters that education is the connection to opportunity and success. By doing so they reaffirm the messages that the women hear daily within the AVID classroom.

Some AVID African-American females had very successful mothers. One mother was an AVID teacher who had received city-wide acclaim for her teaching abilities. Many had overcome divorce, economic troubles etc., had persevered and carved out a decent living for their family. The everyday lives of these families resonated with the messages that the AVID program provided. Education was seen as the path to a better future.

Somewhat unsuspectingly, I found that the AVID Black females received a decided advantage by seeing a mother struggle economically. These young women also benefitted from having a mother or father return to college. They were able to interpret an investment in education as the way in which individuals prepare for the future. Role models can influence and guide the behavior of young people in powerful ways.

Motivations to achieve academically among the Black AVID females often came from sources other than their parents. Sometimes the motivations and convictions came from anticipating

a future with a husband who may not be able to provide for them adequately, an idea that stemmed sometimes from their own experiences but often from the perception that Black men do not achieve the same educational levels as Black women. Several of the women told me they were very upset with the low aspirations of their Black male peers. Teesha said that she yells all the time at her "boyfriends" that they should go to college and especially 4 year colleges not community colleges. She and her friend said they don't understand why they don't go when many of them have the grades.

The historically low educational achievement among the Black population in general has often been attributed to the problems inherent within the structure of society, particularly economic factors. According to McBay (1992), African Americans have been caught in a "cycle of poverty." He notes that the poverty rates for the African American population are the highest of any group in America: "31.6 percent (9.43 million people) in 1988, nearly two-and-a-half times the national average, and more than three-and-a-half times that of white Americans (a ratio that has not changed since 1969)" (McBay, 1992:142). As I have mentioned over 50% of African Americans live in female-headed families which translates into even greater poverty for African American females.

The Black women in AVID have "penetrated" or understood the economic structure of society. The "feminization of poverty" is a lived reality for these young women. They echo the concerns of

the Black community in response to their status in the larger society. They are aware of their position as women and as women of color attempting to seek employment. They are also well aware of the problems their husbands will face both in attaining college degrees and in getting a job. One student told me she wants a husband who will work but she fully expects to make a better salary than he will because of the field she is choosing. She already assumes her husband will not be as well educated. She doesn't want a "couch potato" but she is anticipating being the primary contributor to their income. This plays heavily into her motives for doing well academically.

These women are also not blind to the images portrayed by the media that Black men often live a life of crime and violence. African American men are often absent from the homes and the women are responsible for their well being and that of their children. This is a scene that is a lived reality for several of these girls. They are adamant they will be able to take care of themselves should this happen to them.

The Black males were also of low income backgrounds. The majority of them would be the first in their family to attend college. These African American young men were surrounded by messages from the media and elsewhere that they were not going to succeed or that they might end up in jail. They were plagued with stories and experiences of discrimination and economic hardship among their Black male peers. The effects of Black joblessness on the lives of young men has been discussed by Wilson (1987). He

states,

> Economic trends for black men, especially young black men, have been unfavorable since the end of World War II. While the status of young blacks who are employed has improved with the percentage of white-collar workers among all black male workers, rising from 5 percent in 1940 to 27 percent in 1983, the proportion of black men who are employed has dropped from 80 percent in 1930 to 56 percent in 1983 (Wilson, 1987:82)

In a world without work, young Black men may not see a reason to commit to a long and arduous educational experience. Both these AVID men and women are aware of their position as African-Americans attempting to seek employment and it factors into their decicions regarding education.

## STRATEGIES

### The Effects of Institutional Practices on Educational Attainment

In response to their perceived understandings of their place in the wider socio-economic world, the African American men and women in this study joined AVID. The academic achievement of these minority students, both the young men and women, was facilitated by their participation in the AVID program. The explanation for educational outcomes can not be fully understood without looking inside the school.

Previous studies attempting to explain differential outcomes

by gender have focused attention on what goes on inside the classroom. Grant's (1994) comparative research found that while Black women did not fare as well as white women, they were decidedly better off than their Black male peers. Grant found significant differences by gender within the African American population. In school, Black males were given the fewest opportunities to have extended chats with teachers. They were viewed by the teachers as "mysterious" and "threatening". Many teachers were afraid of them and this factored into their expectations and interactions.

The importance of positive teacher expectations for student achievement has been well documented. An early example was illustrated by Rosenthal and Jacobson in the 1960's when they examined elementary school children and their academic improvement. A self-fulfilling prophecy appeared to construct academic careers. When perceptions are negative, students often fail.

Washington's (1982) study of teachers' perceptions of first and fourth grade pupils alerts us to potential problems constituted in the classroom. Both Black and white teachers disproportionately viewed Black girls in more positive terms than they did Black boys. The Black girls did better than the Black boys. If classroom dynamics remain the same today, we can understand that Black males may be suffering significant disadvantage because of teachers' perceptions.

The stability of this dynamic is evidenced by Grant's (1985)

study. She found that while in general Black students had been typically assessed by their teachers early on with very low expectations for academic success, low expectations were particularly prevalent for the Black male population of students. Even minor misbehaviors of Black males were noted with more frequency by the teachers and interpreted more readily as student disinterest. Grant notes the ramifications of teachers' expectations on Black male students. She states, "the hasty imposition of social controls likely intensified Black males' estrangement from teachers and schools" (Grant, 1985:18). It appears as though a cycle of disengagement occurred whereby low expectations of teachers toward Black males caused students to disengage from academics which in turn caused teachers to have even lower expectations of their ability. The result: poor academic performance of Black males.

The Culture of AVID

The AVID African American students, both men and women appeared to be helped by AVID. These students appeared to have a very different experience from Black students who are not in AVID. AVID teachers held high expectations for all of these students regardless of ethnicity, gender or class. Both Black males and females in AVID noted the impact of hearing an ideology of achievement that underscored individual opportunity. Students were systematically and routinely convinced that they were capable of enrolling in college and doing well. Strengthened by this ideology and coupled with the parallel academic and social

supports they received within the AVID classroom, the Black students assumed behaviors and attitudes that led to their success (Mehan et al, 1996). AVID teachers were successful in navigating the educational career of their students such that both African American males and females fared better than their non-AVID peers.

Other Strategies

The other strategies assumed by these AVID students were very different across gender lines. As discussed earlier, the African-American males strategy was to play sports. They would pursue academics because that was the way the would remain in good academic standing and able to participate on the team. Inspite of the harsh realities that African-American men have to face, those in AVID perceived that the way to avoid economic and racial injustice was to apply themselves academically so that they were able to play sports. The African-American males in AVID did not explain their academic endeavors in response to the actions of role models. Instead, they explained that they were working hard in school to stay eligible to play sports. They received continual support from each other to pursue athletics.

Anderson (1990) has pointed out that the attitudes of Black men are formulated in large measure by an early realization that they will receive the greatest sense of achievement from their male peers for sexual prowess and athletic accomplishments. He notes that Black males typically are struggling for a measure of

self-esteem that can be gained from their peers, a feeling of self-worth that seems unattainable in a world that offers no possibilities of productive work. For many Black males "deprived of the traditional American way of proving their manhood [gainful employment], casual sex is a way to be recognized by peers as making the transition to manhood. Thus, according to Anderson, many Black males choose to have sex with as many women as possible, impregnating one or more. Casual sex is therefore fraught with social significance for the black man who has little or no hope of achieving financial stability and hence can not see himself taking care of a family (Anderson, 1990:136)

The Black males in AVID chose athletics instead of sex as a way in which to judge their own accomplishments and those of their friends. I had very personal conversations with the men in this study on a routine basis over a period of three years. We discussed dating, condom use, drugs, interracial dating and a wide variety of sensitive issues. Based on our conversations, I believe that the measure of success for these AVID adolescent males was their academic and sports endeavors, not their sexual conquests. This is not to say that they did not date but they privileged their athletic participation as top priority. Similarly to the African American women in AVID, academics took precedent over affairs of the heart. The men did not see their opportunity structures as being blocked, even to the extent that they felt that such goals as playing pro-football or pro-basketball were in their reach.

While the men pursued athletics, the African-American females relied on academics and peer support. The women were not propelled into a world of romance as has been suggested by some earlier research (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). Instead of actively pursuing romantic involvements with men as a way out of economic insecurity, they worked hard and went to college. A very specific set of pragmatic concerns surfaced in the lives of young Black women in AVID due to their gender, class and ethnic background which led them to form very specific strategies. Their concerns informed their discourse regarding romance, education and future success. The everyday lives of these Black women made it necessary for them to become more independent and economically, more secure than their mothers have been if they were to avoid a similar lifestyle. AVID Black females developed strategies to ensure that their convictions and beliefs would be satisfied. They realized that their goals could be fulfilled first, by participating in AVID and second, by ensuring that they would not fall into a world of romance, get pregnant and thus be dissuaded or distracted from their future goals.

These women knew that participation in AVID gave them a decided advantage over their neighborhood peers. For the most part this group of African American women had participated in AVID at least three years. Unlike their neighborhood peers, AVID helped to make sure that they were getting the grades required to keep them in the "running" for those coveted college slots. Many of the AVID students were taking Advanced Placement and Honors

classes. Attendance in these classes is becoming increasingly important for admittance into college. In contrast, the neighborhood girls were occupying the lower academic tracks the AVID women had left before joining AVID. While non-AVID women were falling increasingly further behind in their academic work, Black women in AVID were preparing for college acceptance. When decisions were to be made about school and romance the women who had not participated in AVID chose romance instead of academics because many academic options had already been closed to them. The AVID women had agreed to participate in an educational program that would ensure that their goals were met.

The African American women in the AVID program had conscientiously formulated strategies that would define how men were going to figure into their lives and how they were not. Inspired by the ideology that "no boys [were] going to stand in [their] way of college," and that they were really scared that "one of them might get pregnant and not be able to attend college," they said they were not going to "give [the guys] what they want" because they felt that the road to success was only to be achieved by getting a college education. They assumed particular patterns of behavior. Some chose not to date at all, but this was not true for all of them. In fact many did date and even occasionally got involved very seriously. But, when one young woman found out she was pregnant she made the decision to have an abortion. She wanted college and did not want motherhood to interfere. The women were prepared to take the actions that

would allow them to meet their educational goals.

Another strategy that the women employed was to monitor the romantic involvements of each other to make sure that they all stayed on the academic track. The women spoke often to each other about dating and college. For example, when one of the young women was deeply involved in a relationship with a boy who had dropped out of school, the others were quick to warn her that he might interfere with her academic efforts. When I questioned this student she told me, "I'm not going to be held back by him. I feel sure of myself that I can do it. I have a choice" (Annette). She was also very cognizant of the pressure she was getting from the other AVID women that he probably wasn't good enough for her. Again for this group of Black students, having academic peers allowed for a process to occur whereby they measured themselves and each other by academic standards not by what boy they were currently involved with.

Some of the women chose to date AVID students because to some extent these men would help reinforce their own college goals and help them stay academically motivated. This dating pattern was not always the case of course. Some of the women even seemed to develop an almost adversarial relationship with their AVID Black peers. They claimed they were really mad at the men because they had made derogatory comments about them. Some of the AVID Black males were dating white students and this caused a lot of rather heated discussions. One male student verified the complaints of the women. He said that when he took

a white girl to the prom, the black girls were really angry with him.

Regardless of the specific relationship that the women formed with the boys, affairs of the heart seemed to be of greater concern in keeping them from their goals than were academic problems. As a consequence, these women set limits on the amount of involvement with men. Their attitude was that men were to facilitate their goals as academic peers but they were not to become so involved with them that college plans would be jeopardized. The African American females in my study developed very specific strategies that allowed them to stay on the academic path, enroll in college, and create an opportunity to better or make their lives different from those of their parents and neighborhood peers.

## CONCLUSIONS

The academic success of the African American females and males in this untracking program is the result of a reflexive relationship that has occurred between structure, culture and agency. These men and women understood that the social and economic conditions that exist in society disadvantage them in significant ways. The women were aware of the problems that Black women face in today's society because these images were presented daily in their homes and in their communities. Their membership as women in a Black, low income community made them all too well aware of the impact that racism and sexism had on their lives and the necessity of receiving a college education. Likewise, the Black men in AVID

responded to the academic rigueur of AVID in response to their needs as Black males from a low income community who saw participation in athletics as the avenue to success. Their cultural background, that is their ethnicity, class and gender played heavily into the shaping of their actions toward education.

Inspite of the challenges of discrimination and inequality, neither males nor females engaged in the "resistance" nor "cultural inversion" tactics that Ogbu and others suggest many "involuntary" minorities adopt. Instead of subscribing to actions that could disqualify them from academic pursuits, they became active in the manipulation of their own academic careers. Their pragmatic concerns informed a set of beliefs about the necessity of education.

The Black men and women in this study developed specific strategies to ensure their academic and future occupational goals. These students all participated in the AVID program. The culture of the AVID program reaffirmed the ideologies of these men and women and offered them a set of institutional arrangements that provided an ideology of opportunity and a system of academic and social supports. The support of AVID was essential because it helped to mediate the racist and discriminatory practices of the school and to allow the students to develop a critical consciousness about their educational and occupational futures. Because of AVID, these African American women and men displayed a heightened sense of their own opportunities and ended up believing in their own efficacy. Inculcated with an achievement ideology that espouses

possibilities and opportunity, they developed strategies to ensure that their goals were met.

While clearly coming to education with a set of pragmatic motives, the women did not turn to romance to satisfy them. To the contrary, they developed a critical awareness of how romantic involvements could jeopardize the very goals they sought. They consciously orchestrated and monitored their romantic behaviors and those of their AVID friends. Similarly, the Black men in this study did not follow the example of the Black men discussed by Anderson. Rather than electing to demonstrate their manhood through sexual exploits, the AVID men strategized that athletic pursuits would provide them with economic success.

What we still need to know is how the profile of AVID African-American females and males is similar or different from the African-American population in general. We know that more AVID students enroll in college than non-AVID students. By identifying the program effects and the background effects of the AVID men and women, we are provided with a framework by which we can more adequately assess the general pattern of academic achievement among a larger population of African Americans.

Additional research must be conducted to more accurately describe the lived experiences of African-American females and males. Not enough attention has been given to the reasons behind African-American students academic performance across gender. While it is essential to expose the effects of race and class on academic achievement, this study has shown the significance of also exposing

the effects of gender when students construct the meaning they give to education.

This study has shown that the social relationships that exist within the homes and communities of these young women and men transmit a specific set of messages that are unique to their gender and are in response to the anticipated roles they will face as husbands, wives, fathers and mothers in the African-American home. By comparing the educational experiences of Black men and women we learn a great deal about how they are uniquely situated in classrooms and society. By avoiding all inclusive statements, yet by tapping into the gendered lives of these AVID students we learn what AVID African-American men and women say about their educational experience and their lives and thus we are better able to understand the ways in which social forces contribute to or impede their success.

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